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MICHIGAN'S RAILROAD JACK*

By C. Howard Ross, M.D.

"Railroad Jack" was born as Harry Cooper, of Scotch-Irish parents, in 1863, in Oshkosh, Wisconsin. He attended Oshkosh High School and Oshkosh Normal, graduating in 1884. He then enrolled in Rush Medical College and completed about half of the courses required for a medical degree. At that point he fell in love with journalism. In 1889 he became staff writer for a railway magazine in Bay City, Michigan, and assumed the nom-de-plume of "Railroad Jack," which label lasted him the remainder of his life, and is extending well beyond the grave. In 1892 he concocted a new publication of society news in the windy city, called the Chicago Eccentric. During this journalistic episode (1890-1895) he became a friend of Eugene Field, also a drifter as far as education was concerned.

In 1895, at the age of 32, Railroad Jack took to the road. He became the "wayfaring omniscient," as he sometimes referred to himself. He undertook to answer all and any questions fired at him by any who cared to take up the challenge, and he dealt with personalities, events, dates, wars, and tall historical tales. Jack first appeared in this role in Michigan in 1896. Mr. Francis L. D. Goodrich, University Librarian at that time, tells me that Jack demonstrated to the students on State Street his famous "ride-the-rods hammock." He made the University Library his headquarters for scholarly research, and Mr. Goodrich recalls the many hours of concentration he spent at the reference shelves and in the periodical room. He became a good friend of President Angell, as also of President Birge of Wisconsin, and President Thompson of O.S.U. Dr. Charles Sink states that Railroad Jack never was seen at a concert unless possibly in disguise. However he was observed occasionally at Oratorial Series lectures, and especially BookerT.Washington night in old University Hall. He usually began his tours in the middle or central states, disappearing each spring and returning in the winter, washing dishes in some fraternity to keep him through the cold spell. He was wont to call Ann Arbor his home. Quickie travel was by the rods, and while he preferred the central states he was not opposed to an occasional cross-country jaunt. His favorites were Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin.

* This is a much reduced version of Dr. Ross' paper read for the Society on the life and personality of this colorful individual. Apologies for necessary abridgement of a most entertaining evening of reminiscence and anecdote.

My own first vivid recollection of Railroad Jack goes back to the year 1912, when I was a Freshman at the University of Michigan. I saw him on the streets of Ann Arbor and heard him talk five or six times between 1912 and 1916. He was not a tall man, possibly 5 feet 7 inches in height, weighing about 150 pounds, getting a bit heavier year by year. He had a ruddy face, unruly black hair, broad shoulders, always appeared freshly scrubbed but with finger nails that would not quite satisfy Emily Post. It was in front of the old Michigan Union Building, Cooley House, that I first saw him with his famous hand cart, on which was blazoned in bold red and black the words: "Railroad Jack, World's Champion History Expert."

My diary states that in November, 1912, the men students had enjoyed a Sunday afternoon bull session in the old Union assembly hall, with the help of cider and doughnuts. We were then addressed by Railroad Jack. He spoke caustically in introduction, with agnostic remarks, and egotistical references to his friendships with people in high places. The brow-beating went on for a few minutes, then his mood changed to a challenging note as he offered his question and answer period. The students confronted him with leading questions on dates, wars, and persons; some had open text-books to poke holes in his replies. He snapped out the correct answers fast and furious, and when he employed subterfuge it was so well done no one had the nerve to say he had indulged in the well known dodge.

My gang of cut-throats rehearsed our questions in advance, and I coached the boys on some of my grandmother's extravaganzas in history. I whooped out the date:"1648!" He snapped back at me: "Treaty of Westphalia; end of the Thirty Years War," and added "Why bring up that subject?"before I could catch a breath to deluge him again. I answered that my maternal grandfather was a student of the Thirty Years War and that his personal hero was General Eusebius von Wallenstein. Also that grandfather, failing a son to name Eusebius had named his daughter, my mother, Eusebia, and I pronounced it U-sēbia. Jack glowered at me, "Is the old man still alive?" "No, he died in 1896." Then, "Call the old boy up and tell him that U-sebia is incorrect; it should be Oi-sābia."

Over on the other side of the hall W. A. P. John and his gang of noisy incorrigibles asked Jack to relate his most juicy historical tale. It ran something like this:

Prince William Rufus, son of the Conqueror, was marauding the north English countryside when he came upon an Abbey that housed among its students Princess Edith Matilda, granddaughter of England's Edmund Ironsides and daughter of Malcolm Conmore III of Scotland and Queen St. Margaret. William Rufus was struck dumb by the beauty of the Princess and ordered the Abbess to prepare her for flight with him that very night. The horrified Abbess, in dismay, hastily decided upon strategy. When William Rufus returned by moonlight for his prize, he found Edith Matilda dressed as a novice, kneeling before the altar, counting her beads, candles burning. The confused Prince stumbled away in embarrassment, and there was much rejoicing in the Abbey. But the story is not yet ended. Years later when William Rufus had succeeded the Conqueror as King and had subsequently died, his brother, Henry I, seized the throne, and Henry asked for the hand of Edith Matilda in marriage. The Pope intervened, saying in effect:

"The maid protected herself by an assumed vow, which thus became an actuality. She can never become the Queen of England unless she renounces her vows, by application to Rome." So a royal messenger was dispatched to Rome, seeking Papal dispensation of Edith Matilda's vows. The royal agent was allowed to cool his heels there for 17 weeks, then the Pope relented and dispensed her vows, and following this Edith Matilda became Queen of England. This union combined Norman and Anglo-Saxon and Scottish blood, and she was the ancestress of the present Royal family."

I have checked this tale with Professor Preston Slosson, of the University History Department, who admits that "it holds water fairly well."

By 1913, Railroad Jack bounced back into Ann Arbor again. Once more at the Michigan Union the Sunday afternoon session was on. I was well primed on the pre-Conquest history of England, and I piped up: "Who was Aelgifu?" Jack beamed, "You thought you had me. Well, Aelgifu was a lady of so many attainments that I will count them off for you..." which he proceeded to do, to the number of 13, most of them also holding water "fairly well."

Henry Ford called on Railroad Jack, it was said, three times, but Jack was "too busy" to return the calls. However he later toured Greenfield Village with his cart, accompanied by Ford himself. He also lectured in downtown Dearborn in the 1920's. Ford offered Jack a shiny new car, but Jack declined with "The cart came before the auto!" Later he yielded and accepted, in his declining years, a "House Car," auto with trailer, in one. The archivist at Ford Motor Company states that once Henry Ford placed Jack on the assembly line at the Dearborn tractor plant. This lasted exactly four days, when the historian took to his travels, his lectures, and his quizzes again. Ford said, "You can't cure a historian and you can't reform a hobo." It is believed that Jack's cart is at Greenfield Village, but the present curator there is not able to identify it.

Jack's character was cock-sure, defiant, haughty. He sensed his own high state of individuality. He made a will, including: "I bequeath my body to the University of Michigan Medical School for proper study. The scientists will then reveal to the world the reasons for my remarkable memory as to names, dates, locations, and events." (This prophecy was not fulfilled.) He had few friends but they were true blue. He said "I have no ties; I owe no homage to man or beast or institution." No one ever caught him in church. Offered a $5000 vaudeville contract, he stormed, "No subsidy." He bragged that he could live well on 80c a day, and scorned all offers to "compromise his freedom."

His body was found in an alley in Coldwater, Michigan, October 7, 1933. It was brought to Ann Arbor through the charity of Francis LaPointe and Father Carey, of St. Thomas Church in Ann Arbor. Monsignor Peek says that Father Carey and Railroad Jack had a sort of tolerant and understanding friendship over the years. Jack is buried in an unconsecrated plot in the Ann Arbor Catholic Cemetery.

Ann Arbor, Michigan
March 29, 1955

W A S H T E N A W H I S T O R I C A L S O C I E T Y

(XII #3)

Introducing to our members your new 1955 Officers:

President - Mrs. I. Wm. Groomes, 1209 S. State, Ann Arbor
Vice-President from Ann Arbor - Dr. F. Clever Bald
" " Chelsea - Walter Leonard
" " Dexter - Leo Hoey
" " Manchester - Mrs. Thomas Walton
" " Saline - Mrs. Carl Curtis
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Secretary - Miss Joy Meier, 903 E. Huron, Ann Arbor
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Mrs. R. G. MacKenzie Dr. C. Howard Ross
Directors whose term expires July 1, 1957:
Robert Eberbach Mrs. George Langford
Miss Adelaide Rueger
Directors whose term expires July 1, 1958:
Ernest Allmendinger Edwin C. Oakes
Howell Taylor

These officers were elected at the annual meeting on June 25, 1955, held in the Methodist Church in Dixboro Village. Seventy-two members and guests made a tour to the site of Superior Village, the Parker sawmill and grist mill, and the Popkins home, and were served dinner by the church ladies.

The Secretary reported 39 new members, 7 deaths (the latest that of Mrs. Louis P. Hall, 1530 Hill St., on June 19, 1955), and 18 resignations, mostly due to removal from the County. The Society now has 415 members, including 49 Life Members. Professor-Emeritus Emil Lorch was elected Honorary Member of the Board of Directors for life, recognizing his long valuable services to the Society. Miss Geneva Smithe, retiring Editor, was voted Life Membership. The officers of the Society signed Articles of Incorporation on June 15, 1955, so we can now accept substantial gifts. Our Life Membership Fund, which can be used only for building, has now reached $2482.57.

We can't resist quoting a few encouraging remarks from some of our "Exchanges": The American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Mass., inquired anxiously (because of the irregular appearance of our Impressions), "We hope this important publication is not deceased!... In meetings of learned societies I often tell professors of history that they are overlooki ng one of the great potentials of historical source material, the local historical societies." The New York Public Library: "We are anxious to secure this publication for use in our reference work." The Michigan Local History and Genealogy Section Head at the Michigan State Library (who used to live in Ypsilanti!) says she drops her work and read a Washtenaw Impressions straight through as soon as it arrives. The Library of Congress supplies us with franking labels for their copies; and the Indiana State Library prods us flatteringly when they think an issue is overdue. Thanks a lot, Exchanges, and when our Society gets a home with library space we look forward to being real exchangers instead of donors. -- G. Smithe, Ed.

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-- G. Britton, Ed.